

DIGITALCOMMONS
—@WAYNESTATE—

Criticism

Volume 50 | Issue 4

Article 8

2008

The Fictive Origins Of Secular Humanism

Justin Neuman
Yale University

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/criticism>

Recommended Citation

Neuman, Justin (2008) "The Fictive Origins Of Secular Humanism," *Criticism*: Vol. 50: Iss. 4, Article 8.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/criticism/vol50/iss4/8>

THE FICTIVE ORIGINS OF SECULAR HUMANISM

Justin Neuman

The Enchantress of Florence by
Salman Rushdie. New York:
Random House, 2008. Pp. 368.
\$26.00 cloth.

Shortly before the novel's release in the United States, the Sunday edition of the *New York Times* hailed Salman Rushdie's *The Enchantress of Florence* as a work of serious literary ambition destined to draw critical and popular attention back to Rushdie's prose and away from the political and personal imbroglios that have overshadowed his fiction since 1989. As of yet, this has not been the case; early reviews were mixed at best, and though it is undeniably a captivating and compulsively readable book, *The Enchantress of Florence* eschews the significant stylistic innovation and overt, high-stakes cultural commentary that energizes Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* (1988). Instead, Rushdie's newest novel seeks sanctuary in the mirror of history—in this case, a mirror veiled in gauzy multiculturalist platitudes. Despite its preening, *The Enchantress of Florence* proves an essential book; in its strongest moments, *The Enchantress of Florence* repudiates linear, Eurocentric histories of the Renaissance and conjures in their stead a synchronous world of parallel realities in which the seeds of secular humanism flower not once but twice—once in northern Italy and simultaneously in northern India. Read reparatively, Rushdie's novel invites us to reconsider axiomatic tenets about modernity, secularism, and humanism—chief among them the relation between the ethos of modernity and the rejection of an enchanted world.

In terms of genre, *The Enchantress of Florence* is a globe-traversing prose romance about the vicissitudes of love, power, and storytelling—a romance dressed in the guise of an impeccably researched historical novel (complete with an extensive bibliography). The book's opening vignettes transport the reader, along with a golden-haired stranger, by bullock cart into Fatehpur Sikri, the city built by the Mughal emperor Akbar the Great in the sixteenth century. The stranger, who calls himself Mogor dell'Amore (the "Mogul of Love") and whose real name is Niccolò Vespucci—cousin of Amerigo and namesake of Niccolò Machiavelli—has journeyed from his birthplace in the New World via Florence to Mughal Hindustan with a story he will reveal only to Emperor Akbar himself. Gaining entry to the Mughal court through a series of bold stratagems, feats of linguistic virtuosity, and magic tricks, Mogor dell'Amore garners the favor of Akbar and so begins the teasing, digressive weaving and unweaving of a story that captivates the emperor for longer than Scheherazade plied Shahryar with her tales in *The Arabian Nights*. The story that emerges unites the lives of three Florentines (Niccolò Machiavelli, Antonino Argalia, and Ago Vespucci) with Akbar's dynasty by way of an intrepid princess named Qara Kōz ("Lady Black Eyes")—the tragic heroine of Niccolò's tale and the erstwhile enchantress of Florence.

Fictive and real, Florence and Hindustan, East and West evolve as parallel worlds—as "mirrors" of one another, to use one of the novel's favorite metaphors. But so enthralled is the novel with symmetry, parallel, and simultaneity ("We are their dream . . . and they are ours," as one character puts it) that *The Enchantress of Florence* underplays points of contrast (48). Rushdie's depiction of the birth of modernity in the budding secular humanisms of Florence and Mughal India severs the link—common to Renaissance self-understanding and to centuries of subsequent scholarship—between the rise of humanist sensibilities and the recovery of classical antiquity.

According to regnant narratives of the Enlightenment, in fourteenth-century and fifteenth-century Florence the pietistic, feudal social matrix of medieval Christianity deformed in the crucible of the city-state under the twin pressures of mercantile capitalism on the one hand and a revival of classical aesthetics on the other. Individualism, the emergence of linear temporality, and a powerful critique of Christianity depend in no small part on the scholarly methods of textual analysis, hermeneutics, and archival research pioneered by Italian humanists in the fifteenth century—all of which parallel a steady repudiation of the enchanted world of medieval Christendom. Not only can no equivalent milieu of forces be found in Mughal India, Rushdie's depiction

of Florence rejects the disenchantment thesis wholesale, marginalizes classicism and capitalism, and devotes itself instead to the realpolitik of the Medici family and Florentine sexual libertinism. Indeed, though oblique references to the mercantilism and trade that fueled the rise of the Italian city-states register in the interstices of the tale, trade (other than the trade of women) is equally distant from Rushdie's evocation of humanism in Italy and Hindustan.

Nor is Rushdie's point the one we might expect him to make; namely, that "renaissance" (as the rediscovery of the science, philosophy, and aesthetics of antiquity and the rebirth of Europe) cannot describe an Islamic culture that never lost Hellenism in the first place. Nor should *The Enchantress of Florence* be read as a leap aboard the already-crowded "multiple modernities" bandwagon—the striking thing about the way Rushdie portrays Sikri and Florence and the characters who inhabit them is how fundamentally similar they are in attitude, bodily comportment, belief, and ethos. As Akbar philosophizes, "*The curse of the human race is not that we are so different from one another, but that we are so alike*" (311, original italics).

Returning to the plot, Niccolò and Rushdie fill their tales with adventure, violence, and sex, all held in place by the *point de capiton* of the historical record. In Niccolò's tale, the Florentine Antonino

Argalia journeys east, is captured by the Ottomans, becomes an invincible Janissary general, and captures Qara Köz and her mirror-image slave girl (both of whom call themselves Angelica) after defeating the Persian shah (who had, in turn, won her from the Mughals in another battle). Returning triumphant to Florence after several decades, Argalia discovers how mutable titles like hero and traitor, enchantress and witch, can become in moments of political expedience. After Argalia dies protecting his love and her mirror, the women flee to the New World under Ago Vespucci's protection in the final phase of Qara Köz's westward exile—a journey cast as a failed attempt to find, like Columbus, a route to the East in the journey west. In a tangled genealogy that results in Niccolò insisting he is the emperor's uncle (though Akbar is a much older man), Qara Köz turns out to be Akbar's great aunt, a princess expunged from the Mughal historical record for the sin of casting her lot first with the Persian king and then with his vanquisher, Antonino Argalia, "the Turk."

What then, we must ask, are the nature and status in *The Enchantress of Florence* of ideas like humanism and secularism, refracted as they are by Rushdie's idiosyncratic representation of Mughal Hindustan and Medici Florence? In several important ways, Rushdie's novel conforms to mainline accounts of

secularization (as entailing the retreat of religion from public life paired with the decline of individual belief) and of humanism (epitomized by a commitment to beauty as the ultimate aesthetic value, a commitment paired with a recentering of life around worldly affairs and individual reason). None of the principal characters of the novel believe in God, either Christian, Muslim, or otherwise. Instead, religions are an object of scholarly and comparative interest: Akbar establishes a commission to “count and name . . . every worshiped divinity of Hindustan, not only the celebrated, high gods, but all the low ones too” (139). Akbar, like the elite of Florence to whom he is compared, “trusted beauty, painting, and the wisdom of his forebearers. In other things, however, he was losing confidence; in, for example, religious faith” (57).

Reflecting dominant theories of secularization, in *The Enchantress of Florence* religions have lost their normative force but retain cultural influence on private life and social structure: as Akbar tells Niccolò, “[T]he austere religion of our father will always be ours, just as the carpenter’s creed is yours” (139). The public sphere of Sikri is nominally secular in this simple sense. Committed to ending sectarian strife in Muslim-ruled Hindustan, Akbar flirts with atheism: “*Maybe there was no true religion,*” muses the emperor, a man who “wanted to be able to tell someone of his suspicion that men

had made their gods and not the other way around,” and who suspects, moreover, that “it is man at the center of things, not God” (81, original italics). As he riffs expansively on pre-Socratic relativism in the diction of Renaissance Europe, Akbar circles toward a more properly humanist ambition: to “have no other temples but those dedicated to mankind . . . to found the religion of man” (81).

If a simultaneous but disconnected humanist ethos attracts Rushdie to the Mughal Empire and Florence in the late 1500s, the genealogy, meaning, and effects of these humanist visions—and the nature of their relation to one another—remain unclear. Divorced from mercantile capitalism and classicism, secular humanism stands, in *The Enchantress of Florence*, on three equally precarious legs. The first is, ironically, absolute rule: the humanism of Akbar’s Mughal Empire depends on one charismatic autocrat’s pragmatic but hardly necessary response to the demands of administering a multicultural and religiously diverse empire. An emergent humanism is performed in his sovereign decrees, and it achieves its most lyrical evocations in his private meditations. Whereas both Christianity and Islam have wielded the sword of empire and offered transcendental justification for the work and rhetoric of domination, Rushdie’s Akbar sees pluralism as an effective structural principle of enduring dominion. The novel’s

critiques of religion emerge from the relativizing power of this pluralism and from the distancing effect facilitated by a religiously diverse world whose figures travel extensively. When Akbar queries his chief advisor, an observant Brahmin, looking for philosophical defenses of atheism, Birbal puts the case well: "All true believers have good reasons for disbelieving in every god except their own . . . and so it is they who, between them, give me all the reasons for believing in none" (44).

Conjuring Akbar's fictional persona offers Rushdie an opportunity to indulge his penchant for hyperbole and to showcase the charming side of megalomania: Akbar is "the Grand Mughal, the dusty, battle-weary, victorious, pensive, incipiently overweight, disenchanted, mustachioed, poetic, oversexed, and absolute emperor" (30). More importantly, he is a walking paradox: "As a boy he had killed a tigress with his bare hands and then, driven to distraction by his deed, had forever forsworn the eating of meat and become a vegetarian. A Muslim vegetarian, a warrior who wanted only peace, a philosopher-king: a contradiction in terms. Such was the greatest ruler the land had ever known" (33). These contradictions, it seems, are enough to exceed the narrow confines of received religion and enact a poetics of hybridity that is the most recognizable trope of Rushdie's fiction across nine novels and three decades.

The second enabling condition for a humanist ethos in *The Enchantress of Florence*, and an important site of convergence between Medici Florence and Akbar's Sikri, is an ethos of decadence, sexual licentiousness, and a thriving public culture of prostitution. While the autocratic, hierarchical nature of Akbar's empire suggests that Mughal humanism is an epiphenomenon of the sovereign imagination, positing the importance of physical pleasure as a necessary condition for an emergent secular humanism offers a more insightful and enduring commentary. In Rushdie's novel, courtesans and brothels are constitutive elements of the public sphere. The parallel houses of Skanda and Mars in Sikri and Florence sustain unique salon cultures that generate a panoply of visual and literary art while offering sexual permissiveness an alternative to what Rushdie calls "the stink of religious sanctimony" (146). Men in Rushdie's Florence and Hindustan worship (and purchase) women—indeed, much of the novel is devoted to these activities—who supplant religion and history as the source of inspiration for art and action. The misogynistic implications of Rushdie's portrayal of women, a common refrain in the scholarly responses to his work, here achieve a fevered pitch; for a sexually desirable woman like Qara Köz, "poets reached for their pens, artists for their brushes, sculptors for their chisels"—which is to say "that when

you lay eyes on the pair of witches [Qara Kõz and the mirror] the desire to fuck them comes upon you like swine fever" (275, 237).

Finally, and most importantly, secular humanism in the novel requires and reflects a certain relationship to narrative we might call the "novelistic imagination." The successful storyteller in *The Enchantress of Florence* "usurp[s] the prerogative of the gods" in "the creation of a real life from a dream" (47). In this formula, not only does a novelistic imagination foster secularization by substituting worldly stories for those of religion and divinity, the creative force of authorship casts man—and they are men in Rushdie's novel—in the place of God as creator and sustainer of the world. Humanism and secularism converge within the compass of telling and hearing stories while the community of auditors describes the limits of public discourse just as surely as political hegemony. In asserting a link between modernity, secularism, humanism, and the novel, we are not yet beyond the pale of mainline theories of modernity or secularism; indeed, genre theorists from Ian Watt, Michael McKeon, and James Wood to Bakhtin, Lukács, and de Sade agree that, in their historical origins and subsequent development, novels are agents of secularization. In nonfiction prose like the essay "Is Nothing Sacred" in *Imaginary Homelands* (1991), Rushdie espouses a similar view, calling literature "the

schismatic Other of the sacred (and authorless) text," but adding the important qualifier that literature is "also the art most likely to fill our god-shaped holes" (424).

There is a fundamental, unaddressed tension at the heart of *The Enchantress of Florence*—and indeed in much of Rushdie's fiction and prose—between his explicit and implicit endorsements of secularism, humanism, and pluralism, on the one hand, and his equally pervasive argument for the power of fiction on the other. In Rushdie's work, fiction and narrative are powerful, transformative forces; narrative is less a means of representing the world than a mode of apprehension, a metaphysical hammer he uses to smash certainties of causality, a forge of the alternate real. For Rushdie, fictions are the world entire. They are also bound to an enchanted mode of being and knowing—a mode they both require and sustain—explicitly at odds with regnant theories of secularism, modernity, and humanism.

In *The Enchantress of Florence*, fictions are at once a kind of magic and the source of a more sustained ontological transformation. Summoning the novel's titular trope, fictions in *The Enchantress of Florence* are powerful forms of enchantment—and thus explicitly linked to nonsecular and potentially heterodox forms of religiosity from dark magic to paganism. From the citizens of Florence to Akbar and the denizens of Hindustan, Rushdie's

characters are unabashed addicts of fantasy; they are credulous participants in a wide range of narrative phantasmagoria, particularly when they involve romance. In the most endearing and symptomatic of these fantasies, Akbar imagines a woman, gives her a name, Jodha, and makes her his queen in a sovereign act of imagination. Wryly commenting on his own penchant for creating female literary characters who lean more toward male sexual fantasy than in the direction of plausible mimesis, Jodha is "perfectly attentive . . . undemanding . . . endlessly available," in short, "a fantasy of perfection" (46). Jodha's imaginary status, however, has no bearing on her independent existence: like his other wives, she has her own quarters, servants, and plays cards with the emperor. "He gave her a name, Jodha, and no man dared gainsay him" (27). In this formulation, Rushdie suggests that ontology is as much a matter of power—and fear of violence—as it is of evidence. As the stories of Jodha and Qara Köz unfold, however, fictions persistently exceed the bounds of their origins and their authors. The question of a character's independent existence and free will becomes a metonym for theological inquiry: "[I]f God turned his face away from his creation, Man, would Man simply cease to be?" (49). Akbar, prefiguring Benedict Anderson, imagines Mughal Hindustan into existence by commissioning a massive series of paintings; he similarly commissions

a new folio to canonize the lost princess Qara Köz and restore her to the historical record.

After enchanting the emperor and much of Sikri for years, Niccolò's wistful assertion that time operates according to different laws in *Mundus Novus* (thus making it possible for Qara Köz to stop time and for Niccolò to be her son) founders on the rocks of Akbar's pragmatism. In Akbar's retelling of the story, Niccolò is not Qara Köz's son, but the product of an incestuous union between Ago and his own daughter, born to him by Qara Köz's servant and "mirror." For rather obscure reasons, the revelation of incest signals the end, both literally and figuratively. Whereas Akbar considers adopting Niccolò as his honorary son in the *jouissance* of the might-have-been, when the deferral of narrative ends, Akbar bans Niccolò from court, the lake ensuring the survival of the city of Fatehpur Sikri vanishes, and the novel closes with Akbar contemplating his own incestuous union with Qara Köz, who appears to him as a kind of material apparition summoned by the emperor's sovereign imagination. To put it another way, Akbar refuses Niccolò's particular alternate version of history but subscribes—as does Rushdie—to similar ontological commitments that pluralize "a" historical record, seeing it as a text open to continuous revision and artistic appropriation. Dismissing Niccolò's story, Akbar seizes its character, bearing her back with

him across the permeable boundary between the fictive and the real. The story-within-a-story structure thus imbeds and rejects Niccolò's speculative genealogy in the very act of affirming Rushdie's own quite similar conscription of historical figures, leaving the status of the novel's enabling conceit—the synchronous narrative history—ultimately unstable.

Not only has *The Enchantress of Florence* divorced humanism from classicism, by depicting the encounter with fiction through the lens of enchantment, Rushdie's novel severs the links between secularism and its traditional allies: skepticism, reason, and dispassionate analysis. Sikri and Florence are thus humanist and secular in the limited senses described previously, but they are strikingly not places where the retreat of religion parallels a fading of what Charles Taylor and others call the enchanted world of a pre-secular imagination. In fact, these worlds are secular, humanist, and modern to the extent that they are novelistic. The rejection of militant religiosity does not entail or require a commensurate rejection of magic and credulity, nor does it imply an epistemological shift away from an attitude of belief toward one of skepticism. For far too long, scholars of the novel have abetted the project of solidifying a tenuous equivalence between the novel as a genre and secularization as a normative project. *The Enchantress of Florence* presents a decidedly

nonsecular atheism, a modernity divorced from rationalism, and a vision of the encounter with fiction as enchantment rather than the willing suspension of disbelief. Despite its platitudes and pomposity, *The Enchantress of Florence* helps us to see why claims for the inherent secularism of the novel as a genre will teach us little about either secularism or the novel; the novel can instead assist in the effort to theorize secularism, modernity, and humanism beyond the modes of reason and the affects of disenchantment.

—Yale University